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INVISIBLE CHILDREN

PERSUASION IN THE MILLENNIAL ERA:

A CASE STUDY OF
KONY 2012

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Western Oregon University
Honors Thesis

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Frank Nevius
June 15th, 2018

ONE THING WE CAN
ALL AGREE ON

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	5
Background.....	9
Literature Review.....	17
Evidence.....	23
Impact.....	36
Concluding Thoughts	43
Citations.....	45

Abstract

On March 5th, 2012, a video titled *Kony 2012* was posted to YouTube by the nonprofit charity, Invisible Children Inc. (Invisible Children). Founder and director Jason Russell was the face and voice of the video which focused on indicted war criminal, Joseph Kony, and his rebel army, the LRA. The film quickly rose to stardom, reaching 100 million views in six days (Bopp, 2012). The sudden and intense spotlight led to scrutiny from professionals on the topic who proved the cause was not as legitimate and politically up to date as the video claimed. This pressure led to a very public mental-breakdown for Russell and a steep decline for Invisible Children as a whole.

The purpose of this thesis is not to focus on the shortcomings of Russell or Invisible Children, but instead to examine the ways in which the *Kony 2012* movement pioneered modern persuasion methods targeted at the Millennial demographic. Persuasion methods via the internet and through social media are common and extremely useful today given that more than one billion people are active on Facebook and other social media platforms. Millennials, the 18-34 age-group, make up 44% of current Facebook users and social media has become a powerful tool for sharing information and gaining support.

Kony 2012 used a variety of successful, targeted persuasion methods that led the way for modern persuasion and social media marketing. The success is evident in the number of views the video gained as well as the amount of money raised by Invisible Children. The craze may not have been able to survive professional scrutiny, but it did leave a lasting mark that can illuminate

modern persuasion methods. By the end of this analysis I hope to have achieved a better understanding of three main points:

1. What new persuasion methods were executed that led to the *Kony 2012* success?
2. How did *Kony 2012* spearhead social media persuasion methods aimed at Millennials?
3. What are the impacts of this new form of Viral Media Advocacy?

Introduction

Although the focus of this thesis is not to analyze the shortcomings of *Kony 2012*, it is important to begin this analysis by first explaining the full context of the video including its weak points and criticisms.

Kony 2012 was a viral video that set precedence for modern viral advocacy videos. It was released on YouTube March 5th, 2012 by the non-profit Invisible Children. In the 30 minute film, viewers were informed about Ugandan war criminal Joseph Kony and his army of abducted children. Filmmaker Jason Russell voiced the film and discussed his personal connection with a young African boy who had been affected by Kony's crimes. The film included interviews with a variety of guests from Russell's son to international experts.

The purpose of the video was to "make Kony famous" (Russell, 2012- 23:00). Invisible Children felt that not enough was being done by the U.S. to help Uganda stop Kony because not many Americans had ever heard of him or the issue. Despite being 30 minutes long, the video went viral across Facebook and Youtube, reaching 100 million views in six days. Invisible Children advertised their 'Action Kits' and bracelets in the video and sales of those too were extremely successful.

Part of this widespread success was aided by the video "trending" on YouTube; *Kony 2012* ranked as the 3rd highest trending YouTube video of 2012. YouTube selects videos to be featured on the trending tab based on the following prerequisites:

“Trending aims to surface videos that:

- Are appealing to a wide range of viewers
- Are not misleading, clickbaity or sensational
- Capture the breadth of what’s happening on YouTube and in the world
- Ideally, are surprising or novel

Trending aims to balance all of these considerations. To achieve this,

Trending considers many signals, including (but not limited to):

- View count
- The rate of growth in views
- Where views are coming from (including outside of YouTube)
- The age of the video” (*Trending on YouTube* - YouTube Help)

The video met many of these requirements. It appealed to many viewers, involved world events, covered a surprising issue, was a newly created video, and had high view counts coming largely from Facebook (Bopp, 2012).

Additionally, celebrity influencers had a large impact on the views received in the first days of posting. After Oprah tweeted about the video on the 6th, the day after the video was posted, views went from “66,000 in the first day to more than 9 million in the following day” (Florian).

On March 15th, Russell who had become the face of the campaign suffered a mental break. He made headlines for wandering the streets of San Diego nude, shouting profanities and nonsense (Williams, 2012). This, combined

with professional scrutiny that had begun to come out, put a halt to the momentum that had been picking up over the past ten days.

After that turning point, Invisible Children and their campaign no longer had the same illusion of legitimacy and power that it had when the campaign first launched. The point of the action kits that were sold was to “cover the night” on April 20th, 2012 (Russell, 2012-26:28). Supporters would go out at night and post as many Kony posters and symbols as possible to bring awareness to a greater audience. However, due to the downward spiral in success and image, the turnout of support was significantly smaller than initially expected.

Some success was achieved. The U.S. government agreed to send over troops to help the Ugandan government. This was announced in the second video Invisible Children released, “*Kony 2012: Part Two - Beyond Famous*”, but that video did not achieve the same success as the first. Since then, Invisible Children has had a significant drop in funding and in 2014 had to shut down their San Diego headquarters and strip down operations (Raab, 2014). They still exist today, but only with a staff of 19 people (“Our Team.” *Invisible Children*).

Although the outcome of such intense spotlight led to huge company cuts and limited resources, it still should be remembered for the unique and impressive success of *Kony 2012*. As mentioned previously, this was a 30 minute video. It’s target demographic was millennials, people born around 1980 to 2000. That age group is typically difficult to reach if the message is not short and sweet.

According to a study by Microsoft, research has uncovered a correlation between media consumption and shortened attention span. The average attention span has gone down from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8 seconds in 2013 (“Microsoft Attention Spans Research Report.” Microsoft). Being able to use that demographic to spread the video, despite being so long compared to other advocacy campaigns shows how successful Invisible Children and Jason Russell were at targeted, effective persuasion and marketing.

Another study also shows evidence that fast-paced cartoons had a significant impact on children’s attention span. Millennials were the first generation to grow up with televisions and computers becoming commonplace in households. Television shows like *SpongeBob Squarepants* and others popular shows among that age group are known to have faster-paced visuals and story lines which are what the study showed negatively impacted attention span. (Lillard, Peterson)

That fast pace that has been shown to negatively impact children, is the same kind of fast pace we see in *Kony 2012*. This is interesting to note for future study as distracting viewers with tools shown to affect attention may be a factor in getting away with the types of persuasion we see in *Kony 2012*.

Through analysis focused on formal rhetorical analysis, ELM production, and observable lasting impacts, I will examine how the *Kony 2012* film pioneered modern viral video persuasion method[12] s.

Background

Joseph Kony

Joseph Kony was born in Northern Uganda in 1961. He was of the Acholi people and grew up an altar boy but dropped out of school at age 15 (1976) (Howden, 2008). In 1981 the Ugandan Bush War began which triggered mass violence, rape, and looting. At that time Tito Okello, who too was Acholi, was president of Uganda. Okello was overthrown by the National Resistance Army (NRA) who went on to eliminate many former government soldiers and Acholi people. This lasted until 1986 but paved the way for Kony to create the Lord's Resistance Army in response to the NRA's anti-Acholi efforts.

The LRA was initially created as a Christian group seeking to control the country by the 10 commandments and Acholi[15] nationalism. It's military strategy and actions however have been largely been known for violence. According to a report by *The Guardian* in 2015, the LRA has been responsible for more than 100,000 deaths and 60,000 child abductions (Smith, 2015). It should be noted though that child abductions for use in an army is not exclusive to the LRA; in 2006 a representative of the United Nations (IRIN, 2006).

In 2005 Joseph Kony was indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) but has not yet been caught. There have been rumors of him being in poor health but no real progress on his capture has been made. Although he has not been caught, the LRA has shrunk significantly. Since 2015, reports say no more than a few hundred members remain. This was likely the result of one

his senior aides surrendering himself to the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2015 (Smith, 2015).

Jason Russell

Jason Russell, born in 1978, is an American director and filmmaker and an alumnus of USC School of Cinematic Arts. Shortly after graduating, he and fellow young filmmakers Bobby Bailey and Laren Poole, went to Africa to make a film. They were inspired by the work of another filmmaker, Dan Eldon. He had been beaten to death after trying to make a film about famine in Somalia (Patrangenaru, 2009). After seeing, experiencing, and filming evidence of the LRA's presence in Uganda, they returned to the U.S. to start up their non-profit, Invisible Children.

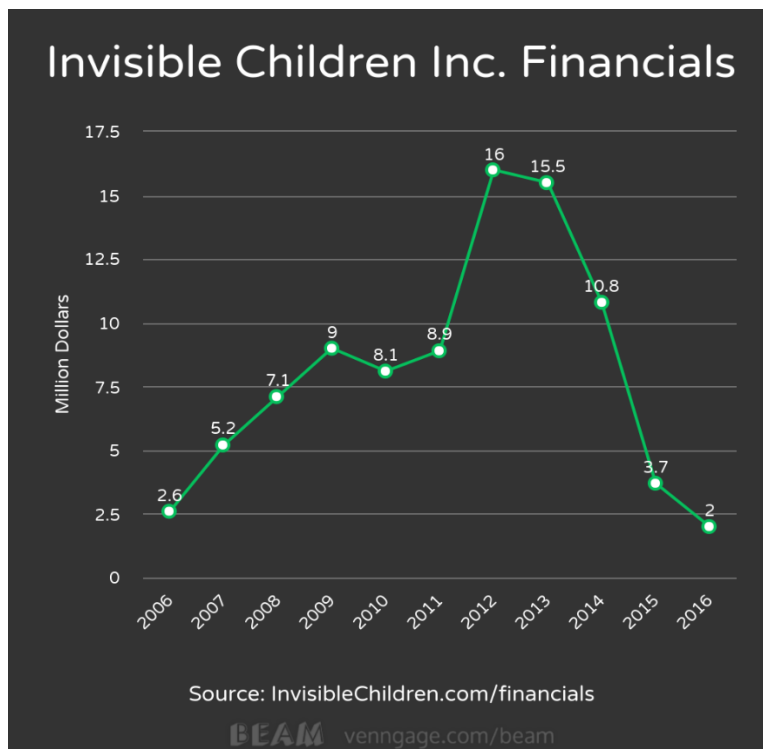
Jason and his partners returned in 2005 to do more interviewing and filming. In 2006, after releasing their film *Invisible Children: Rough Cut*, the team won a film award and gained support for their non-profit.

At the height of *Kony 2012*'s success, the Invisible Children organization was under intense scrutiny, and especially Russell as he was the face of the movement. On March 15, 2012, Russell suffered a public mental breakdown and had to be detained by San Diego police for a mental evaluation. He was seen, and filmed, walking around frantically, slapping the ground, shouting profanities and nonsense— all while naked. He was hospitalized for several weeks and later came out saying that he had suffered “reactive psychosis”(Duke, 2012).

Invisible Children

Invisible Children, inc. was founded in 2004 by Laren Poole, Bobby Bailey, and Jason Russell. They first learned of the LRA in 2003 when they went to Africa to make a film about the War in Darfur. After seeing violence around them as evidence of the LRA, they shifted their focus to that. After meeting locals and gathering footage they created the video "*Invisible Children: The Rough Cut*" to highlight the experiences and struggles of the children and citizens who were affected by the LRA. After screening the video across the country and gaining support, they started Invisible Children, inc. as a non-profit charity group.

The LRA left Uganda in 2006, but the Invisible Children continued efforts to see Joseph Kony arrested. In 2010, President Obama signed the "Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act" and stated, "We have seen your reporting, your websites, your blogs, and your video postcards—you have made the plight of the children visible to us all" (Naidoo, 2015). The group continued to raise awareness though and in 2012 release their most successful campaign ever, *Kony 2012*.



The first year of financials for Invisible Children Inc. shows 2006 with \$2.6 Million. This rose somewhat steadily to a plateau in 2009-11. In 2012 when the viral video was released, funds skyrocketed to \$16 Million. By 2014,

financials dropped to \$10.8, and then all the way down to \$3.8 in 2015. The last fiscal year shown, 2016 dropped to lower than 2006 with just \$2 Million.

Experts

Dr. Beatrice Mpoma is one of many experts to weigh in on the validity of the *Kony 2012* film and movement. She stated, “What that video says is totally wrong, and it can cause us more problems than help us.” (Pflanz, 2012). Mpoma is the director of Kairos, a local health organization in Gulu, which was once the center of LRA activity. In an interview with The Telegraph she went on to say, “There has not been a single soul from the LRA here since 2006. Now we have peace, people are back in their homes, they are planting their fields, they are starting their businesses. That is what people should help us with.”

Other influential voices of Uganda too have issues with encouraging military action. Javie Ssozi is a Communication and Media Specialist in Uganda. He is

also the Co-Founder and Project leader of Rural Farming for Development and runs a popular blog called “The African Timer”. He has said, “Suggesting that the answer is more military action is just wrong,” and is concerned that ‘making Kony famous’, as the film claims it is trying to do, could inadvertently add to Kony’s power.

Rosebell Kagumire, a Ugandan journalist who specializes in peace and conflict reporting stated, “This paints a picture of Uganda six or seven years ago, that is totally not how it is today. It’s highly irresponsible” (Pflanz, 2012). Other critics pointed out how only 3 Ugandans were interviewed, two of whom were politicians. Many felt that the film did not focus enough on the actual people of Uganda and what they thought and felt about the matter. It over-emphasized the false idea that the LRA was still very present in Uganda. One spokesman for the Ugandan Government, Fred Opolot, went so far as to say “I suspect that if that’s the impression they are making, they are doing it only to garner increasing financial resources for their own agenda” (Pflanz, 2012).

Kony 2012- Shortcomings

These expert criticisms are valid. In an overview description, *Kony 2012* sounds like a noble cause meant to help unite the world for peace and justice. This may have been the intent of Russell and his team, but there were many damaging stereotypes and misrepresentations of the issues in Uganda.

I have watched *Kony 2012* many times and one of the first issues I see every time is a multitude of examples of Russell’s White Savior Industrial Complex.

“White Savior Industrial Complex” (WSIC) is a term coined by Nigerian-American novelist Teju Cole in response to *Kony 2012* and described it as a “confluence of practices, processes, and institutions that reify historical inequities to ultimately validate white privilege” (Cole, 2012).

In other words, WSIC is used to describe situations when a White person advocates for themselves as a savior figure to people of color and typically over emphasizes that the POC are hopeless and need to be saved by White people, usually glorifying the supposed charitable deeds that the “White Savior” is doing.

In addition to the WSIC tone throughout the video, there are remarks and behaviors that come off at best ignorant and at worst outright racist. When he first introduces Jacob, he shows a clip of the two of them at Seaworld to illustrate how much he has changed Jacob’s life. Jacob gets startled by a dolphin and Russell says “It’s okay, they’re nice. They’re different than sharks”, again, at best ignorant (Russell, 2012-4:10).

There are also two clips of Russell speaking with Jacob in Uganda in a fake Ugandan accent, which is objectively terrible and strange. “What is it that you want to be when you grow up?” (Russell, 2012- 6:00). “You go to school here? Yes. That’s how you know English so well” (Russell, 2012-4:33).

Other criticisms stem from the way the video seems to be more about Russell and how the White American young people are becoming heroes for the cause rather than focusing on the people who are affected. One common issue with U.S. groups trying to help developing nations is that they draw

attention away from local existing programs and direct the spotlight onto the U.S.. *Kony 2012* did just that.

Similarly, there were issue with where money raised by Invisible Children was actually used. According to Mark Ritson's research in "The Lessons we can Learn from Kony 2012", "of the \$8.6 million raised last year, only 32% went to Uganda" (Ritson, 2016). Funding going to "programs" didn't always mean that it went to the people of Uganda.

The video also was highly dramatized and misrepresented the current situation in Uganda. Only once was it briefly stated that Joseph Kony had left Uganda and not many details of the current state of the LRA were given. It was quickly glossed over to maintain the sense of urgency that was being conveyed to the audience.

Another similar instance was when Russell stated that Joseph Kony "is not fighting for any cause, but only to maintain his power" (Russell, 2012- 11:53). This is not true. As explained during the background section on Joseph Kony, Kony was motivated by Acholi nationalist efforts in response to the National Resistance Army targeting and killing Acholi people.

The lack of Ugandan representation, over dramatization of current issues, and over all emphasis of Ugandan helplessness was upsetting to many locals and experts.

Past Viral Videos

The most well-known viral videos prior to *Kony 2012* were made for the sake of humor and general entertainment rather than to spread a message or spur action.

Kony 2012 changed that trend by using the platform of viral videos to reach a large audience. Russell was the first to achieve massive success by combining social advocacy and viral media.

The top five viral videos of 2012 ranked by Youtube based on shares, views, and a variety of other factors are *Gangnam Style*, *Somebody That I Used to Know- Walk Off the Earth*, *Kony 2012*, *Call Me Maybe*, and *Barack Obama vs Mitt Romney. Epic Rap Battles of History Season 2*.

The rest of the top ten include other videos made for the sake of entertainment with *Kony 2012* being the only exception to that trend.

View counts break down as follows:

Gangnam Style- 3.1 billion views

Somebody That I Used to Know- 182 million

Kony 2012- 102 million

Call Me Maybe- 75 million

Barack Obama vs Mitt Romney- 138 million

Another distinguishing feature of *Kony 2012* among top video competitors is length. The four others in the top five are all under 4.5 minutes and the rest of the top ten are still under 8.5 minutes.

Lit review

In Cassandra Bopp's own Honors Thesis, "The Implications of Viral Media & Advocacy: *Kony 2012*.", she addresses a variety of topics that are key to any analysis of the *Kony 2012* phenomenon. Included is background on how videos, and more specifically, viral videos became a media form that entities strive to create, as well as background on Joseph Kony and the LRA. Additionally, Bopp explores the early steps Invisible Children took to create the *Kony 2012* video and film techniques used to appeal to audiences.

Another key section is aimed at analysis of backlash and commentary the video received by experts and general audiences. Lastly, there is also pertinent information to my thesis on the nature of viral videos and the ways *Kony 2012* influenced or had an effect on social media itself. Included in the analysis of Kony's viral nature and social media presence is data I plan to use from LexisNexis Academic which tracked the popularity of Kony over a variety of platforms from blogs to Facebook, Youtube, and more.

All of these factors and pieces of research are integral to not only the foundation of the thesis but some of my conclusions as well. Some of her information on the backgrounds of Joseph Kony, the LRA, and Invisible Children were used as starting points to build out my own background sections.

Her research on film techniques, nature of viral videos, and Kony's effect on social media is also helpful. Bopp has gathered numbers for topics including views gained to help convey that the video did in fact reach a new level of

success that no other social advocacy video had done before which is a key point of my thesis. I will use this research as starting points when looking at how exactly *Kony 2012* was such a success but build on explanations of how and why I know that it was a differently targeted campaign than past non-profits had produced.

The authors of the scholarly journal "YouTube-ification of Political Talk: An Examination of Persuasion Appeals in Viral Video" focussed their research on the effect of Youtube videos on politics. This information at its core clearly shows how Youtube videos have a strong influence on the public's perception of people, groups, events, and projects. It describes how more and more people are turning to the internet, or as argued by this journal, Youtube, for trusted information on politics.

In fact, according to this journal "during the 2008 presidential campaign, voters rated watching YouTube political videos as one of the top three most popular online political activities." I reason that although the *Kony 2012* video is not as directly tied to politics as, for example, 2008 political videos, it still has a strong underlying call to action for the government and general public alike.

Not only is the content of *Kony 2012* related to domestic political action, but global politics as well. The spotlight that social media platforms like Youtube and Facebook can put on various groups, events, and projects is a key point being made in this journal, as well as point that I am attempting to illustrate in

my thesis. Some of the persuasive elements this journal looks at include ethos, pathos, and logos.

Numerous statistics and research studies are included in this source with valuable information to my thesis. Some pieces of research I am planning on incorporating include statistics specifically on how people get their information regarding politics via social media as well as the influence of credibility in these videos.

Andre Florian of the Media Studies Department at University of Amsterdam published another thesis that looks at my topic. Florian's research focus in "Viral Dynamics and Visibility – How Content Evolves in Network Culture – The Case of *KONY 2012*" is on both the way message sharing has been able to expand through social media compared with traditional media, and the possible motives behind the making of the *Kony 2012* video. The social media platforms of twitter and Facebook were instrumental in aiding the success of *Kony 2012* and are the main way *Kony 2012* started trends in millennial targeted persuasion and outreach. This information is well supported throughout Florian's research which provides me with solid foundational research.

Additionally, Florian discusses in detail factors that may have influenced the creation of the video itself which was also brought up by some of the experts from Uganda that voiced criticisms. Interesting points unrelated to my thesis are brought up including a nationwide cluster map that shows that the hashtag #Kony2012 began trending for the first time nationwide in Birmingham,

Alabama before the video was even released. Florian makes some sound speculations about backers of the video and ulterior motives to possibly increase the U.S.'s interest in foreign relations. For future study, I may pursue this information and see if there are any more recent social advocacy campaigns with similar foreign affair ties.

My main usage of this source is tied to the information beginning on page 38. This section, "III-Topology" contains the most extensive data collection of any of my sources ranging from engagement clusters to views on each day of the 10 day popularity boom and decent. Another key research topic is the comparison of the amount of popularity achieved by traditional media versus the *Kony 2012* video.

This is particularly relevant to me as a large focus of my thesis is demonstrating the way persuasion methods have changed and become able to reach further with the useful tools of social media. This will be a valuable source of insight to the way information on social media moves, is shared, and is engaged by social media users. This will jumping point for me expand on how Invisible Children created their viral video to appeal to an audience that would be best suited for sharing in this platform of ease and world-wide accessibility.

Robbert Wilmink coins the term "Autistic Enemy Images" in this work to explain the key persuasive method he believes was employed in the *Kony 2012* viral video. He defines this term as a persuasive method to alienate an image, or in this case person, through techniques of identification and

labelling, simplification, repetition, personification, and visual referencing. The way Joseph Kony is shown in the viral advocacy video was very effective in creating a negative impression and sense of immediacy to the issue of the LRA.

Throughout Wilmink's thesis, he closely analyzes various images in the film and the ways that the depiction of the "characters", so to speak, shape our perceptions of them. One of the biggest ways the films does this oversimplification and visual referencing. The work describes multiple ways the film skips over important details, like that Kony had been active 26 years already. Skipping over details like that and showing only current examples of conflict allowed the filmmakers to more easily convey a sense of urgency. As for visual referencing, the text points to clear examples of that too in the contrasting ways Kony and filmmaker Jason Russell are shown.

Another factor that is explored is the reasons behind how the film was made and the ways various media platforms helped hasten the growth and success of the project. This aspect of the film is interesting to me as I have done research on the financial records of Invisible Children and seen firsthand that the film stirred up an incredible amount of income for them.

By looking at and for the elements of persuasion defined in this thesis, (identification and labelling, simplification, repetition, etc.) in addition to my own chosen methods, I can create a solid framework of analysis for how the video attempted to create a positive and credible impression. This will help me establish proof of the current ways persuasion in social media is being lead in

regards to amounts of pathos versus ethos and logos. I expect to find that with the younger demographic, pathos is a much greater influencer.

My Additions to These Works

While all of these works have valuable information to my thesis, they don't address the specific point of study I aim to explore. These works contain useful information as to factors that made *Kony 2012* a success, but I plan to theorize further into how these factors were in fact specifically aimed at Millennials.

That point of differentiation is key to understanding the impact of *Kony 2012*. It wasn't just a success because of those elements of persuasion, but because they were all carefully and thoughtfully selected to get into the minds of their key demographic, Millennials. By choosing that demographic specifically, *Kony 2012* was able to spread through the social media web like wildfire and I expect to find evidence that those techniques are still being used today because of the precedence that *Kony 2012* set in this growing field of Viral Media Advocacy.

Evidence

Neo-Aristotelian Analysis

To begin dissecting what components led to the success of *Kony 2012*, I will use three different angles of analysis. First I will use the Neo-Aristotelian Rhetorical Analysis, then compare those elements to common persuasion methods including the Elaboration Likelihood Model, and then compare once more to the roles and weight of ethos, pathos and logos.

The Neo-Aristotelian Rhetorical Analysis looks at nine aspects of a speech, or in this case, a narrated video. Those nine aspects are as follows:

1. The Rhetor
2. The Occasion
3. The Audience
4. Invention
5. Arrangement
6. Style
7. Memory
8. Delivery

The Neo-Aristotelian Rhetorical Analysis model was originally meant to analyze speeches but can be applied to this case in virtually the same manor, the only exception being “memory”.

The Rhetor

Jason Russell immediately sets himself up as a relatable, family-oriented person. He is a graduate from the USC School of Cinematic Arts. Shortly after graduating, he and fellow young filmmakers Bobby Bailey and Laren Poole went to Africa to make a film. They hadn't yet heard of Joseph Kony but hoped to capture some impactful footage.

As discussed in Russell's background above, Russell and his friends were inspired by another filmmaker they had heard of who was beaten to death after trying to make a film about famine in Somalia. This idea of theirs that they could go to Africa and, with ease, find something shocking to capture like their inspiration had is a troubling start to what appeared to be a noble cause.

They ultimately did stumble across evidence of the LRA's presence in Uganda. This was their opportunity to run with a cause and after filming in Uganda they returned to the U.S. to start up their non-profit, Invisible Children.

In the video, it's not brought up that they went to Uganda looking for a story. Russell simply paints himself and his group as people who honestly just want to help right the injustices they had seen while in Uganda.

It's important also to note that Russell is a handsome young man. The Halo Effect of a conventionally handsome man being the face and voice of the film also added to the audience's impression of Russell as a rhetor. His wife and son are also shown in the video and are also good looking.

His very cute son is featured in the beginning of the video and in an interview type situation where he learns about the truly “bad guy” Kony is (Russell, 2012- 9:45). As a rhetor in this situation, Russell’s 4-5 year old, cute son is meant to represent the pure and innocent child that we all began as.

The Occasion

The occasion or time during which *Kony 2012* was released is arguably the biggest falsehood in the film. Russell describes the situation as though Joseph Kony was still a prevalent issue in Uganda in 2012 which experts have stated was inaccurate. He mentioned briefly that Kony and the LRA had moved away from Uganda but not that by 2012 Kony’s activity had gone down significantly, in part due to his being in hiding. It is true however that Joseph Kony was, and remains, #1 on the International Criminal Court’s most wanted list.

The video was posted on March 5th, 2012. Being the Spring before a presidential election, it may have been hoped that the timing would gain more attention from politicians, but it was to no avail given the brevity of the video’s fame.

The Audience

Audience is the focus of this study and something that every decision of the video took into consideration. The audience was, without a doubt, Millennials.

It did receive attention from other generations too, but it is clearly tailored to Millennials.

The editing uses shorter frame times so that the pace of the video is quicker, which is a common tactic to reach younger audiences. The music included is also geared toward a younger audience with songs like *Punching in a Dream* by The Naked and Famous, *Roll Away Your Stone* by Mumford and Sons, and *I Can't Stop* by Flux Pavilion. These pop, indie, and electronic songs are more likely to be remembered by young viewers and then associated with the video.

Aside from the politicians, specialists, and some Ugandan people shown, everyone featured in the video is a Millennial. Numerous montages show edgy, hip looking Millennials uniting together against Kony and spreading the word. We see Millennials donning war paint and bandanas over their mouths, carrying posters, banners, and cans of spray paint, running through the streets at night with torches while slapping countless Kony posters on the walls.

These are techniques we see in advertisements for clothing brands and other age-specific or target brands. By combining such strategies to the case of social advocacy, it stands to reason that Russell would be successful in “selling” the cause.

Invention

The category of invention focuses on how the argument was constructed around ethos, pathos, and logos. Pathos is clearly the dominant component in the video given the countless appeals to emotion with ethos also being a strong feature. Logos was also used with some details given about how many people had been affected by Kony and the LRA, but it is less of a focus to the main narrative.

I will dive into examples further later on. Some that were most prominent were the use of Russell's son Gavin, the Ugandan boy Russell met, Jacob, and images of Ugandan children.

Arrangement

The arrangement of the video is very cinematic with numerous climaxes to hook the viewer's attention. It began with Russell's voice discussing how connected the world is thanks to the internet. The video then introduces Russell and his family and quickly tied them to the featured Ugandan child, Jacob. This initial talk of connection was important to quickly tie viewer's emotions to people who they may have seen previously as very different from them.

Throughout the video there are frequent changes of mood. We see footage of sad Uganda children then shift to another high-energy young person montage. Cute Gavin clip to explanation of the magnitude of Kony's crime in Uganda. Talk of politics and politicians to another young person montage.

This back and forth between heart-wrenching numbers and imagery to exciting and inspiring action is key to keeping the attention of viewers.

Style

The style in the video is another key factor to the Millennial targeted messaging. Phrases like “war zone”, “army of young people”, “proved that a bunch of littles could make a big difference” set the tone. The language used was powerful yet clear and not too complex for any viewers to understand.

It painted a clear picture of young people rising up to make an “army of peace” despite lack of help from older generations who run the government — “everyone in Washington we talked to said there is no way the United States will get involved in a conflict where our national security or financial interests aren’t at stake”. *Kony 2012* is full of language targeted at Millennials to feel empowered and connected to the cause and as if they are the only ones who can see it and make change.

Another facet of style was music. As mentioned earlier, music was another way we can see that the video was target towards the Millennial demographic. The video felt like a music video at times. There were three music montages featuring trendy songs and young people shown taking action.

The visuals that went along with the montages were very graphic and eye catching. Fast changes, bright colors, bold fonts, and shaky camera or faux-grit added for dramatic effect are seen throughout the video.

Delivery

Russell is an experienced speaker given his time as co-founder and spokesperson of Invisible Children Inc. His voice and appearance are crucial to his delivery. As mentioned when describing Russell as the main rhetor, The Halo Effect is also tied to this category since having an attractive appearance for the delivery adds to a positive impression.

All the clips we see of Russell show him looking well dressed and groomed, but not too stuffy. We see him giving speeches and at rallies with passionate vocal inflections and nonverbals as well.

In the voice overs that gusto is not lost. Russell speaks confidently and with the same impactful inflections and passion. Other speakers included like Jacob and Gavin speak honestly and sound genuine. The facial expressions and tone of voice add to that feeling and therefore add to the credibility of the message.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model focuses on two paths a message can take to reach a message receiver, or in this case a *Kony 2012* viewer. The first path is Central Route processing and the second is Peripheral Route processing. The difference between the two is that the Central Route pertains

to how highly engaged viewers receive information, whereas the Peripheral Route is how less focused or knowledgeable viewers receive that same information.

When crafting a message that is meant to persuade or change the attitude of a large audience of viewers, it is important to include tactics to reach viewers by both the Central Route and Peripheral Route. The *Kony 2012* video does this in part, but has greater focus on the Peripheral Route.

It makes sense in this context to give greater attention to developing elements that help the Peripheral Route messaging. A viewer who would receive information via the Central Route would be someone very knowledgeable and interested in the topic of Ugandan war-criminals. Given that the target audience was Millennials in the U.S., that's not going to be a very significant portion of the audience.

However, Central Route geared persuasion was not left out entirely. It was important to build credibility to a certain extent. Numbers on how many Ugandans had been abducted provided sufficient evidence that Kony's impact was legitimate and the first-hand accounts given by Jacob added a real-life element to those numbers.

It wasn't quite enough information though, or enough accurate information, to satisfy actual experts who began voicing criticisms shortly after the video was posted. As Dr. Beatrice Mpoma stated, "What that video says is totally wrong, and it can cause us more problems than help us."

The small amount of information given in the video may have sufficed for Central Route viewers who were interested in U.S. politics or social advocacy in general, but it clearly wasn't suitable evidence for more thorough experts.

As I said, based on the target audience, that was alright for Russell's team. The audience they were trying to reach was young people who want to make a difference, not experts who have a thorough understanding of Ugandan politics, crime, and international affairs.

The Peripheral Route of persuasion is meant to get the attention of viewers through appeals other than logos. As I have described, the *Kony 2012* video is very visually interesting, has lots of well-known or memorable and young sounding music, and even features a number of trendy celebrity influencers from Oprah to Taylor Swift to George Clooney.

All of these factors have nothing to do with the message on their own, but they inherently bring out positive feelings and thoughts in the viewer's mind. Those positive gut reactions to visuals, music, and celebrities latch onto the *Kony 2012* message and leave a lasting impression. In this way the filmmakers were able to somewhat circumvent the hard parts, like actual facts, and still be able to change viewer's attitude.

Typical Persuasive Elements

Step one: establish your credibility.

Step two: find common ground

Step three: provide evidence

Step four: connect emotionally

All four steps are clearly tied into the neo-Aristotelian analysis of *Kony 2012*. When compared to ethos, pathos, and logos we can see even more overlap. Establishing credibility is ethos. Providing evidence is logos. Finding common ground and connecting emotionally are pathos. It is not by accident that two of the four commonly told steps of persuasion are based around pathos, or emotion. Particularly as we see in Kony, and by observing its success among Millennials, pathos is a wildly successful tool. In this case of targeting a viral advocacy video at Millennials, it was one of the most successful tactics in viral media history.

Logos was the most neglected of the three components. Evidence was provided through Jacob, statistics, and footage from Uganda. However, a lot of the details were dramatizations of the truth. Russell attempted to make it sound like Kony was still highly active, when he wasn't.

Despite lacking more sound evidence, Russell did a good job using ethos to establish his credibility and also connect with the audience. He introduced himself as a filmmaker who sought out to learn and help others by researching and filming in Africa. He showed himself numerous times as a loving father who, in part because of his being a father, wants to make the world better for his son and other children like his son.

This appearance of genuine kindness and caring made him seem more credible. He also set himself up this way to be in opposition of the lawmakers who he blamed for turning a blind eye to Kony, since many people view politicians as the opposite of genuinely kind and caring. To many Millennials, being the opposite of politicians added a great deal of credibility.

The most significant portion of attention was given to pathos. This is evident throughout the video with greater amounts of focus being given to storytelling emotional elements. Some of the strongest emotional appeal components come from including Russell's son Gavin, telling Jacob's story, and showing numerous clips of sad children and also emotionally inspiring footage of young people working together.

I argue that Gavin is one of the strongest emotional appeal elements because of his function as an embodiment of innocence and also his role in connecting the viewers to Russell. Gavin is shocked and saddened to even hear the gentle explanation by Russell of what Kony does. His youthful innocence is meant to connect with viewers and bring out their own sense of knowing from a young age when something is wrong.

Russell also discusses numerous times in the video about how Gavin is just like the children who have been abducted, thus connecting the audience to a far away issue by relating it to Gavin. Russell talks about how he wants to make the world a better place because of his son and for his son. Many viewers may relate to that sentiment even if they do not have children yet, but perhaps want to.

Jacob is the second big tool for emotional appeal. Again, Gavin and Jacob are often tied together and talked about in terms of being similar. When Jacob is first being introduced in the video, Russell points to a picture of Jacob and asks Gavin who Jacob is and Gavin says that's it's their friend Jacob who lives in Africa (Russell, 3:54).

Talking about Jacob as a friend of theirs is another way they connect the issue to viewers in the U.S. who may have never heard of Kony. Additionally, there are clips included where Jacob talks about the death of his brother and cries and those are universal kinds of appeals to make people want to empathize with the situation.

The third point of emotional appeals that I found to be strongest is more of a theme and mood throughout the video. Part of what makes the video engaging and keeps viewers attention is the cycle of sad footage and stories followed by inspirational montages that inspire hope. Strong language is used throughout these moments that is meant to specifically engage and amp up the target demographic.

For example, phrases like "an army of young people" (16:22), or "And if we succeed, we change the course of human history" (8:28), or "proved that a bunch of littles could make a big difference" (16:37). This type of language and phrasing combined with music and well-chosen visually interesting or heart-wrenching graphics set the mood and tone for the video that had a strong focus on emotional appeal, or pathos.

Social Media Emphasis

Perhaps most importantly, we can see evidence of *Kony 2012*'s demographic focus through the media forms used to launch its success.

“34 million views occurred from mobile devices. At 30 minutes

long, this documentary does not lend itself to quick viewing.

However, this shows the growing interest in mobile media.

“*Kony 2012*” was viewed almost 12 million times as an embedded link on Facebook, and 9 million YouTube views came from a *referral from Facebook*.” (Bopp, 2012)

Additionally, based on information from Youtube, *Kony 2012* gained its greatest viewership from individuals in The United States, United Kingdom and Canada. “These are all predominantly white, English-speaking countries. The top viewers were females between the ages of 13 and 17 and males 18 to 24, and 45 to 54” (Bopp, 2012).

Two of those top three viewer categories were Millennials. The easy share-ability of this video combined with its specific persuasion elements described earlier made it the perfect fit for a viral and trending social media topic.

Impact

Impact on Millennials

Using the platform of social media to spread social advocacy stories is effective, but is it harmful in the long run? 96% of viewers discovered the *Kony 2012* video through Facebook via a mobile device (Florian, 40). Given the nature of social media share-ability combined with the ease of mobile devices makes sharing a video extremely quick and easy. The drawback though is the fickle nature that social media may encourage.

It's incredibly easy to share a video and then have that good cause serve as positive character attribute to the sharer. If you share a good cause, it shows that you care about that cause and perhaps are a caring person in general. But because it's so easy to do, many people share without actually following through on any action. High views result, but action is not guaranteed. As a Millennial myself, I am weary of the way social media platforms seemingly encourage sharing messages but make it so easy to create a façade of character.

A further point of research that would be interesting to look into would be whether or not social media actually encourages "slacktivism". Slacktivism is a term coined by Fred Clark and Dwight Ozard at the Cornerstone Festival in 1995 during a seminar series. Clark commented that he intended for the use of "slacker" being part of the term to be a positive, not a negative as the focus

of the seminar was the positive ways that young people are making a difference (Wilbert, 2015).

Journalist Malcolm Gladwell later described it as “the way of the new style activist who just signs online petitions and shares on Facebook, instead of the banner waving, old fashioned street style, brawling with coppers activist days” (Lo, 2016).

New forms of social advocacy persuasion is frequently becoming tied to the sales of commercialized goods. In the following section, Impact on New Media, I will examine numerous examples of brands using videos with similar persuasion strategies to *Kony 2012* and the ways some of these brands encourage sales of flaunt-able accessories over actual donations.

As good as it is to sign a petition because it sounded good in a short paragraph on Facebook, it’s better to choose a meaningful project and dedicate real time and resources to it. That lasting dedication was clearly lacking in the *Kony 2012* campaign.

Impact on New Media

Although there has not yet been another social advocacy video to achieve the same level of success- and length, as *Kony 2012*, there is evidence of similar film and storytelling techniques to reach a similar audience. Here are some examples:

“Lokai: Exploring Our Oceans with Jay Alvarrez”

“Kendall Jenner Pepsi Ad”

“The Spring- The charity: water story”

“Love your melon”

“Apple- new beginnings”

“Pep talk from a kid president”

“The Scarecrow”

“Abercrombie and fitch gets a brand readjustment”

The first brand that came to mind when researching was Live Lokai. I used to see their ads on Facebook all the time, frequently accompanied by a video featuring gorgeous young people adventuring about in swimsuits. Their video, “Lokai: Exploring Our Oceans with Jay Alvarrez” is a prime example of this. (Alvarrez, 2016).

Jay Alvarrez is a very attractive, beach boy-looking Instagram celebrity. He often makes popular videos with GoPros and Drones showing him doing things we all wish we could go do with great editing that matches up with trendy dance-beat music. This video was much the same except it showcased the Live Lokai bracelets on his hands while swimming in crystal clear oceans, petting sharks, and feeding those island pigs.

Each Live Lokai bracelet has a bead on one end that contains water from Mount Everest to remind wearers to stay humble even at their highest points, and Dead Sea mud in a bead on the other end to remind wearers to stay hopeful at their low points. There are different colored bracelets that donate to

different charities but the main appeal in their videos and ads come from the style and faces used to showcase the product.

A more infamous example of *Kony 2012*'s influence is the Pepsi ad featuring Kendall Jenner (Pepsi, 2017). Similarly to *Kony 2012*, it ended receiving extreme backlash for trivializing complicated issues. Controversy aside though, there are many other similarities as far as content and style.

The entire 2 minute and 40 second ad is styled very similarly to a music video. Much like Kony, we see short shots of visually interesting sets and scenes featuring all young people marching together for change. Music montages were a big hook for Kony and it was meant to have the same appeal in the Pepsi ad.

The third example, "The Spring- the Charity: Water Story", has the most similarities I've seen (Charitywater, 2016). It is 21 minutes and 30 seconds and begins with beautiful images of nature and describe how important water is to our lives; this is reminiscent of the *Kony 2012* intro showing the earth and examples of human connectedness around the world. Charity: Waters video is also voiced over in a similar manner to Kony and features another handsome young man, Scott.

Shortly after the water introduction, we are introduced to Scott and his cute young family- very similar. The video spends more time focusing on the Scott and his life struggles but then gets back to a similar storyline to Kony. It

focused on Scott's documenting of a medical service ship that specializes in facial tumors and was traveling to Liberia.

While there filming, Scott met a man named Harris who changed his perspective and made him even more motivated to travel to smaller villages and learn about their struggles. This is, again, a very similar storyline to Jason Russell meeting Jacob.

From there, the video talks about how Scott learned about the clean water crisis and began raising money to help build wells in Northern Uganda. He then founded his charity, Charity: Water.

Another example is the brand Love Your Melon. This brand is known for giving 50% of profits to nonprofit partners to help fight pediatric cancer. They have numerous advertisement videos that feature exciting, empowering music and showcase beautiful young people wearing the hats or giving them to kids in hospitals.

The ad titled "Love Your Melon- Our Story" starts by showing a young woman typing on a laptop with a female voice over (Love Your Melon, 2017). The narrator says, "At Love Your Melon, we're dedicated to changing the story". They talk about how they provide "warm hats, therapeutic experiences, and financial support" to help heal and inspire children and families battling cancer. This inspirational language about creating change coming from a young female voice is a very similar appeal to the kind of language used in *Kony 2012*.

The rest of the videos carry these or other similarities as well. The main appeal in all of these examples that differs from other advertisement types is the emotion, language, and style. Those three factors have the greatest weight in both *Kony 2012* and these more recent videos.

Impact on Social Good

This new-age trend of social advocacy videos and advertising strategies have pros and cons to them. By using targeted tools like emotion, language, and style, charities and brands have been able to make their story appealing to a motivated demographic of Millennials.

With the case of *Kony 2012*, Invisible Children was able to put 80.5% of profit, roughly 13 Million dollars, towards programs in Uganda. Though, as mentioned earlier, these “programs” do not necessarily direct funding to people specifically living in Uganda. Even though their message was skewed and criticized by experts and it’s hard to say if the money was put to its best use, that’s still a lot of money being used to at least try to help. Other examples given about new media influenced by the same persuasion techniques have good sides to them as well, some more than others.

Charity: Water also has done good things with the attention they’ve received as a non-profit. 100% of public donations fund clean water programs and overhead expenses are covered only by private donors. Their 2016 financial

report showed that they raised 28.9 million dollars for water programs, making up just over 75% of their 36.1 million net profit.

Other charities however don't do as much good with their power of persuasion. For example, Live Lokai only gives 10% of their classic bracelets profit to charity, or \$1 for every cause themed bracelet. 10% of a \$16 bracelet is an insignificant amount compared to what their profit margin likely is and ironically, the cause themed bracelets which cost \$18 don't even donate as much as the regular bracelets.

The infamous Pepsi commercial also did not do much for a cause. It disingenuously tried to piggyback on the attention Black Lives Matter had been getting in the media to try to sell more Pepsi products. This trivialization of serious social issues was highly criticized, much like *Kony 2012* was.

The point to take away from these examples is that yes, spreading awareness through trendy targeted persuasion can help bring in money, but buyers need to be wary of where their money is really going. Buying a blue Live Lokai bracelet that supports Charity: Water is good, but it'd be a lot better to give the full \$18 to Charity: Water than to pay \$17 for a rubber beaded bracelet and have only \$1 go to the charity's clean water projects.

Concluding Thoughts

Why This Matters

As we see in the news and media, Millennials and now Gen Zers alike are very politically engaged generations. We want to leave a mark on the world we live in. However, we also are known for shorter attention span. In this age of technology that we've grown up with, instant gratification is expected but not always possible.

You can't change the world by sharing a video, signing an online petition, or buying a bracelet. It can help, but not in as meaningful a way as other more ongoing forms of protest or charity work.

Many brands take advantage of their situation by commercializing activism. Buying a bracelet for a cause and sharing it on Facebook gets quick and positive social recognition and brands are advertising in a way that encourages that kind of reaction and support.

As consumers, we Millennials need to be more wary of flashy advertisements designed to get our attention with style and emotional appeals rather than facts. It takes time to research a brand to see where your money is going. That lack of instantaneous knowledge may be why we are so apt to base our opinions of a charity or brand on our opinions of the video quality rather than the research that went into it.

My hopes for this research is for Millennials and Gen Zers to understand that every campaign we see is manufactured to appeal to us as a demographic and that doesn't mean that it's accurate information. It's targeted persuasion through use of language, style, and emotion.

My hopes for this research for charities and brands is to use the targeted elements of language, style, and emotion responsibly. If good, well researched causes could create a video as successful as *Kony 2012*, minus the inaccuracies and Reactive Psychosis, that'd be great. I know that there will always be brands that use these techniques to distract from inaccuracies but at least I personally am better prepared for them now.

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